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The Social Identity Approach: appraising the Tajfellian legacy¹

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Abstract

Since its original formulation, Tajfel's Social Identity Theory (SIT) has broadened considerably from its original focus on intergroup relations and is now applied to a wide range of phenomena. Indeed, the 'social identity approach' has become one of the most widely used perspectives in contemporary social psychology. In this article, I examine the popularity of Tajfel's writings on social identity and intergroup relations, especially over the last thirty years when they started to become more generally used. I offer a critical appraisal of the original SIT, both as a theory of intergroup relations and as a theory of identity, concluding that its real value lies in its success in offering an over-arching perspective on the importance of groups in social life and its ability to stimulate new areas of research. I then widen the discussion to consider how the social identity perspective has been used in a number of other fields of enquiry.

The year 2019 marks the centenary of the birth of Henri Tajfel, one of the most influential social psychologists of the 20th Century. In his short academic career – just 28 years from graduation to premature death – he made several important contributions to social psychology. Of these, perhaps the most famous – and enduring – was his theorising on social identity, now usually known as social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel, 1974a, 1978abc; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986). Since its original formulation over forty years ago, SIT has broadened considerably and has been applied to an enormous range of social phenomena, far beyond the aspects of intergroup behaviour for which it was originally intended as an explanation. Indeed, it is little exaggeration to claim that the ‘social identity approach’ (as I shall call it²) has become one of the most widely used perspectives in contemporary social psychology. It is thus appropriate, especially in this 100th year since Tajfel’s birth, that we appraise the legacy of SIT, both to the field of intergroup relations to which it was originally applied and to the discipline more generally³.

I begin by examining the extraordinary popularity of Tajfel’s writings on social identity and intergroup relations, especially since the early-1990s when they started to become more widely diffused. Then, in a second section, I widen the discussion to consider how the social identity perspective has been adapted and adopted in a number of other fields of enquiry. Most of what follows reflects my own assessment of social identity theorising and research, as someone who has worked in that field since my doctoral training (under Tajfel) some decades ago. Occasionally, I supplement that personal appraisal with commentary from other social psychologists. These include colleagues who have worked mostly under the social identity umbrella and some who have not. These views were garnered as part of another project, an intellectual biography of Tajfel (Brown, 2019).

Social Identity Theory and Intergroup Relations

As is well known, SIT offers itself as a general theory of intergroup behaviour that rests on a few basic assumptions. First and foremost, it holds that people sometimes see themselves (and act as) *individuals*, at other times as *group members* (the so-called *interpersonal-intergroup* continuum; Tajfel, 1978a). In the latter case, their *social identities* as members of various groups become engaged, and these identities have cognitive, evaluative and affective consequences for people's self-concepts. People prefer to see themselves in a positive light, which implies that there will be a general *search for positive distinctiveness* in their perceptions of and dealings with other groups. This search for distinctiveness may take different forms in socially 'superior' and 'inferior' groups, contingent on various social-structural factors, such as the permeability of group boundaries, the stability of the social system, and the perceived legitimacy of the status relations. Much of the emphasis in SIT is on the preconditions for subordinate groups to seek a change in the current intergroup hierarchical arrangements, and the manner in which they might do so. A distinctive feature of the theory was that it sought to integrate *subjective* aspects of group membership (identification) with *objective* features of the social environment (the nature of intergroup status relationships in society; Tajfel, 1974a; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986; see Brown & Pehrson, 2019, chapters 1 & 8).

In the first decade or so after SIT's publication there was a sustained effort to test hypotheses which were either explicitly stated in SIT or which could be derived from its core propositions - for example, tests of the theory's predictions regarding people's responses to status inequity (e.g., Brown & Ross, 1982; Ellemers et al., 1993; Mummendey, Kessler, Klink & Mielke, 1999; van Knippenberg, 1984; van Knippenberg & van Oers, 1984; Wright, Taylor & Moghadam, 1990) and similarity (e.g., Brown, 1984; Brown & Abrams, 1986; Jetten, Spears & Manstead, 1998). Further research aimed to examine the motivational status of self-

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esteem in intergroup behaviour (e.g., Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Lemyre & Smith, 1985; Oakes & Turner, 1980) or to unravel the link between strength of group identification and ingroup bias (e.g., Hinkle & Brown, 1990; Jetten, Spears & Manstead, 1997). I will not attempt a detailed assessment here of how successful this work was in validating key elements of SIT; suffice it to say that not all its hypotheses were unambiguously supported, though several were (Brown, 2000).

Since that early body of research, the vast majority of the social psychological literature that has cited and used SIT has done so not in order to derive and test specific hypotheses from the theory itself but to use SIT in a rather more general way: *either* to refer to the foundational idea that people may derive their social identity from the groups they belong to, *or* to the fact that, if and when they do so, they will then act in terms of that group membership rather than as an individual, *or* to make the more general point that intergroup behaviour must be simultaneously analysed in terms of both social structural variables and subjective group affiliations. From such basic points of departure, researchers have shown remarkable ingenuity in then extending their analyses to an enormous range of fields and applications. As Dumont and Louw (2009) have documented, the growth in research citing Tajfel's work started to accelerate in the early 1990s and has shown little sign of slowing down since.

There are, in my view, three main reasons for this growth in popularity in Tajfel's ideas, and in SIT in particular: its promise to offer a general theory of intergroup conflict; its account of social identity processes at work in intergroup contexts; and its attempt to provide a new theory of prejudice and discrimination. I critically examine each in turn.

Social Identity Theory as a general theory of intergroup conflict

The first reason for the widespread awareness and recognition of SIT within social psychology and beyond lies in its promise to offer a rather general explanation of social

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conflict that, potentially at least, could be applied to a wide variety of intergroup situations involving ethnic, gender, national or organisational groups. The idea that threats to people's identities might underlie many kinds of conflicts was a valuable supplement to the other intergroup theories available at the time, such as realistic conflict theory and relative deprivation theory (e.g., Campbell, 1965; Coser, 1956; Runciman, 1966; Sherif, 1966). Like SIT, these theories sought the explanation for intergroup tensions in the nature of the relationships that exist within institutions or societies, but they were somewhat hamstrung when confronted with conflicts which seemed to have a symbolic rather than a realistic (or material) basis.

SIT's primary focus on subordinate or stigmatised groups and its attempts to predict when they might (or might not) be motivated to seek social change was also an attraction, appearing as it did at a period (the 1970s) when many minority or underprivileged groups in the West were agitating for change. And because it set itself so firmly against individualistic or reductionist explanations of intergroup conflict – personality, drive and instinct theories (e.g., Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Berkowitz, 1962; Lorenz, 1966) – that still enjoyed some currency in both academic and popular discourse at that time (and since), it was a popular alternative for social scientists of a more 'progressive' persuasion. Such individualistic accounts sought to explain people's (inter)group behaviour in terms of their family upbringing, or their current individual levels of frustration, or via some genetic predisposition, with scant or no regard to groups' positions in society or their relationships with one another. In that sense, they were ill-equipped to explain *changes* in people's behaviour over time and place, or the frequent uniformity that such behaviour often showed within particular contexts.

But the very generality of SIT's formulation, whilst an obvious strength for many purposes, is also something of a weakness. Normally, we expect of our theories that they

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propose a few core axioms or *a priori* assumptions from which testable predictions can be derived about certain well-defined outcomes in particular situations. Typically also, some limiting or boundary conditions may be specified. In crucial respects, as I hope to show, SIT lacks the kind of specificity to make it a properly testable theory. Indeed, for some commentators, as we shall see, it is so elastic that it may not deserve the label ‘theory’ at all⁴.

One example will be sufficient to illustrate this lack of precision. The theory describes several possible reactions by members of low status groups to cope with the negative or insecure identity that their group’s inferior status confers on them: they may opt to ‘jump ship’ (social mobility⁵), especially if group boundaries are sufficiently permeable to permit this; this is presumed to be the default choice in such circumstances (Tajfel, 1974a, p. 69). Failing this, they may adopt various ‘creative’ strategies – find new comparison dimensions, revalue existing comparative dimensions, choose a different outgroup with whom to compare, or even engage in temporal comparisons with how the ingroup fared in the past (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Evidence can be found for all these strategies, although findings have occasionally been somewhat inconsistent with predictions (e.g., Brown & Zagefka, 2006; Ellemers et al., 1993; Jaspars et al., 1982; Van Knippenberg, 1984; Wright et al., 1990).

But critical questions remain. Do members of subordinate or oppressed groups always opt to leave the groups if they can (if boundaries are permeable)? Tajfel himself is a case in point. He was Jewish which, in all the countries he lived, was a consistently stigmatised identity but was not an identity defined by any visible and immutable category markers. According to SIT, given this group boundary permeability, he might well have chosen to hide this identity and tried to ‘pass’ as a Gentile. Yet, apart from a five-year period during the war when he kept his Jewish identity hidden whilst a prisoner-of-war, he was always open about (and proud of) his Jewishness throughout his life (Brown, 2019). Such behaviour is not easily reconcilable with the proposition in SIT that ‘social mobility’ will be the default choice of

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how subordinate status group members behave in permeable group contexts. Evidently, some additional theoretical specification is required which will predict when social mobility or, alternatively, when social change belief systems will come to the fore.

A similar vagueness can be observed in the preconditions necessary for the ‘social creativity’ strategies laid out in SIT; it nowhere specifies which strategy will be chosen when. Such an omission is important, given that the various strategies can have very different implications for the subsequent course of intergroup relations in any given context.

Several scholars, from both outside and within the social identity tradition, concur that SIT’s generality is, indeed, one of its major strengths but, at the same time, also its Achilles’ heel. Anne Maass, for example, notes:

“Although SIT’s ability to offer a unifying explanation for multiple phenomena and to accommodate seemingly unrelated findings is very appealing, this also constitutes one of its potential limits if one assumes that breadth and predictive power are inversely related (an example is its difficulty in predicting which of many possible identity strategies is likely to emerge in a given situation and how self-esteem is linked to social identity). Although SIT may lack precision, it induced, due to its breadth and flexibility, a profound “paradigm shift” that permeated the entire field and that redirected our attention to social identity as a pervasive motivator of human behaviour”⁶.

Constantine Sedikides is unstinting in his praise for SIT:

“Tajfel’s legacy is rich, and I wouldn’t know where to begin....When Tajfel came on the scene the field was still behaviouristically-oriented, and influential theories of intergroup processes emphasised objective reality or behaviour (e.g., realistic conflict theory). Tajfel did not deny the relevance of these approaches, but went beyond them. He made us realise that the subjective is also important. Social

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identity has implications above and beyond those of realistic conflict. In doing so, he linked the individual with society in a masterful manner. When groups are incorporated into the self (identity), this matters and has consequences – positive and negative”.

But, he continues:

“I am not sure it stands up any more as a coherent set of propositions from which it is possible to derive testable hypotheses. (This is not necessarily a problem with the theory, but it is a problem with the theorists: I’ve seen SIT being used to support anything under the sun). As such, I am not sure the theory is falsifiable,it has evolved into a framework”⁷.

Michael Hogg is also worried about the theory’s falsifiability. He believes that it is more of a “*lens*” through which one can view many phenomena in a completely different way rather than a tightly bounded theory:

“It’s a good and a bad thing about social identity theory.....It’s quite a grand theory in many ways, so it can be used to understand a whole array of different phenomena – health behaviour, crowds, the internet, leadership. You name it, it can be used to explain all these things. It’s a huge enterprise for a theory to explain all these things.....it helps you understand half of it. My worry is that it’s almost like it’s been hoist on its own petard, to be honest. It becomes a grand theory that’s almost untestable and unfalsifiable”⁸.

Finally, Dominic Abrams provides a vivid and compelling metaphor to depict SIT. He regards the theory as “*very robust and strong*” for explaining many interesting questions, but likens it to an impressionist painting:

“It’s more like impressionism really. You can get some fantastic impressionist art and you know what it’s saying, you know what it’s telling you. You see the picture

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and it conveys the emotions as well as the image. And that can be much more powerful than the most precise rendition that looks like a photograph”⁹.

Or, to pursue that impressionism metaphor a little further, is it somewhat like Seurat’s painting of the River Seine that conveys a wonderful image from a distance but which, on closer inspection, dissolves into a series of pointillist dots?

Social Identity Theory as a theory of identity

A second reason for the upsurge in interest in SIT over the past thirty years stems from the word ‘identity’ in the theory’s (1986) title. As Postmes and Branscombe (2010) note, ‘identity’ began to feature prominently in popular and social scientific discourse from the early 1990s onwards.

During the past thirty years, much popular debate and political activism have had identity issues at their core. These debates have focussed on the adoption of new identities or the use of new labels for old identities, and on a growth in the popularity of hyphenated identities. In the realm of gender, an example is the discussion about the wisdom of a continued reliance on a binary gender categorisation (“women” and “men”) which excludes those who choose to transition from one to the other (“Transgender”), or who identify with neither (“agender”). In ethnic relations, indigenous peoples in Australia, Canada and the United States have agitated for the right to claim “first nation” status for their communities in recognition of their original occupation of those continents. And, the late 20th Century saw increases in global migration and a consequent cultural adoption of many bi-cultural or mixed identity labels (e.g., “British-Asian”, “Turkish-German”).

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Such cultural trends drew the attention of social scientists. Entering the phrase “*identity in social science*” into Google Scholar (in May 2019) revealed that Tajfel’s (1982) edited book was the first item to appear, followed by a sociology text on social identity (Jenkins, 2014) and a book on identity and clothing (Crane, 2012). Further investigation reveals that several other prominent social scientists started to become preoccupied with the concept of identity in the 1990s, an interest that shows no signs of waning (e.g., Appiah, 2018; Bauman, 1992; Fukuyama, 2018; Giddens, 1991; Hall & Du Gay, 1996).

So, ‘*social identity*’ was an idea whose time had come. And yet, for all that SIT fitted perfectly into the emerging cultural and scientific zeitgeist in the final decades of the 20th century, as a theory of identity it is remarkably simple, perhaps too simple. The core idea is that in many intergroup contexts people take on aspects of their group memberships as guides for their thinking and behaviour; they start acting as group members rather than as individuals. Once a relevant social identity is thus engaged, the famous ‘*search for positive distinctiveness*’ is instigated. This is the only motivational principle proposed, at least in the original Tajfel and Turner (1979) version of the theory.

I believe that, as a theory of identity (rather than as a theory of intergroup relations), SIT fails to do justice to the complexities of group-based identities in today’s world. There are, I think, three reasons for saying this.

First, to posit the search for positivity as the only motive underlying identity maintenance, enhancement or restoration is something of an oversimplification. People also belong to, identify with and act in terms of groups in order to reduce uncertainty about their social world (Hogg, 2007). Or they may do so to be able to achieve outcomes that they could not do alone, to be more efficacious (Breakwell, 1986). Or they may do so to maintain or re-establish continuity with their past (Breakwell, 1986; Sani, Herrera & Bowe, 2009; Smeekes & Verkuyten, 2015). Or they may do so to gain self-insight and understanding (Deaux, Reid,

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Mizrahi & Cotting, 1999). Vignoles (2011) has integrated these different ideas into a motivated identity construction theory which proposes that any or all of the motives of self-esteem, continuity, distinctiveness, meaning, efficacy and belonging are implicated in group identification.

A second reason for doubting the adequacy of SIT as an *identity theory* is that it seems to assume that in any particular context a *single* ingroup identity will become salient and the evaluative positivity of that ingroup versus one outgroup is what drives intergroup behaviour. Yet, as I noted above, the reality of identity construction and expression in many contemporary societies is that identities are often multi-faceted, especially (but not only) for minority groups. Berry (1997) is but one of many acculturation scholars to note that many members of immigrant groups choose to be bi-cultural, identifying simultaneously with their heritage culture and the culture to which they have migrated (Nguyen & Benet-Martinez, 2013; Schwartz, Vignoles, Brown & Zagefka, 2014). Add religion and gender into the mix and the intersectional possibilities quickly become quite numerous and complex (Crenshaw, 1994; Deaux & Verkuyten, 2014).

A traditional SIT response to such complexity would be to assume that, in any specific situation, either one identity (of the several available) assumes greater salience, or that some specific combination (e.g., German-Turk) effectively becomes the relevant ingroup. Yet, it is not clear that these two options exhaust the full range of possibilities and, at the very least, a fully-fledged theory of social identity would need to specify how particular combined identities come to the fore, or how people reconcile identities which, on the face of it, might be in conflict (e.g., ‘Gay’ and ‘Muslim’; Roccas & Brewer, 2002; Wiley & Deaux, 2010). SIT never really offered an adequate account of salience; that was something that was tackled by SCT some years later¹⁰.

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A third doubt about SIT's account of identification was Tajfel's (and Turner's) failure properly to consider the possibility that there could be differences among group members in the centrality of the ingroup to their social identity¹¹. It is as if a social identity is switched 'on' (or 'off') for all group members in any given situation. It is understandable why the theory's authors adopted this position, given that one of their central objectives in formulating SIT was to account for the uniformity of much intergroup behaviour, in contrast to some previous more individualistic accounts. Probably for that reason, there was no hint in the original versions of SIT that it might be important or even possible to measure people's strength of group identification.

Nevertheless, from the 1980s onward, this has been an issue which has attracted a good deal of research attention (e.g., Brown, Condor, Matthews, Wade & Williams, 1986; Ellemers, Kortekaas & Ouwerkerk, 1999; Leach, van Zomeren, Zebel, Vliek, Pennekamp, Doosje, Ouwerkerk & Spears, 2008; Postmes, Haslam, & Jans, 2013). The main reason for this upsurge in interest in identity measurement was researchers' understandable desire to test a basic hypothesis within SIT (that there should be an association between strength of identification and ingroup bias; Hinkle & Brown, 1990), or to examine if key intergroup processes might be moderated by strength of identification (e.g., Doosje, Branscombe, Spears & Manstead, 1998; Jetten, Spears & Manstead, 1997), or to investigate if it might serve an explanatory function as a mediator between the experience of stigmatisation and well-being (Branscombe, Schmitt & Harvey, 1999). For all these reasons, it seems odd that the task to develop a reliable and valid indicator of strength of group identification was never initially on Tajfel's agenda.

Thus, as a theory of *social identity*, SIT has some weaknesses. Other commentators concur, noting that it is actually more a theory about social conflict and social change than a theory about identity. Sik-Hung Ng, for instance, made a telling observation. Noting that the

title of Tajfel's Katz-Newcomb lectures ("*Intergroup behaviour, social comparison and social change*"; Tajfel, 1974b), a forerunner of the first published version of SIT, did not contain the words social identity, he pointed out that Tajfel (1974b) himself was at pains to emphasise in his first lecture that "*the crucial pair of terms in the title are intergroup behaviour and social change*" (Tajfel (1974b, p. 3). In other words:

"(social identity theory) *is first and last about social change*"¹², a view shared by Steve Reicher, one of the most significant contemporary social identity scholars¹³.

Indeed, it is quite telling that the original 1979 version of the theory did not actually contain the words 'social identity' in its title; these were added only later by Turner, when he revised the theory after Tajfel's death (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Turner himself once remarked that Tajfel never liked the term "social identity theory" because "*he thought it did not do justice to the positive distinctiveness analysis. Tajfel thought it would mislead and in this he has been proven right*" (Turner & Reynolds, 2010, p. 16).

Social Identity Theory as a theory of prejudice and discrimination

A third cause of SIT's growing popularity in recent years was its promise to offer a new explanation of prejudice and discrimination or, indeed, of even more catastrophic instances of intergroup hostility like genocide. The last three decades of the 20th century saw little let up in the chronic sectarian conflicts in India, Lebanon and Northern Ireland. 'Traditional' kinds of ethnic prejudice in the USA and the UK - that is, prejudice based on skin colour - may have subsided somewhat in that same period, even though they were replaced by less obvious forms and were also soon supplanted by anti-immigrant sentiment and Islamaphobia (Brown, 2010). And, of course, there was unfortunately no shortage of examples of extreme collective violence - for example, in Rwanda, the Balkans, and Sierra Leone, among others.

Social psychologists interested in understanding and reducing such intergroup antipathy not surprisingly looked to a theory variously entitled "*An integrative theory of*

intergroup conflict" (1979) or "*A social identity theory of intergroup relations*" (1986) for answers. And the fact that SIT had started life trying to explain seemingly gratuitous intergroup discrimination instigated solely by the imposition of two arbitrary categories was an added attraction (Tajfel et al., 1971). Certainly, even the most cursory bibliographic survey confirms this growth of interest in SIT as an explanation for prejudice. Putting 'prejudice' OR 'discrimination' together with 'social identity' into the Abstracts field of one's favourite database will almost certainly yield several hundred 'hits'. Whatever the form of prejudice – Islamaphobia, Turkish-Kurdish prejudice, work-place discrimination, ageism, anti-vegetarian prejudice, religious intolerance, prejudice towards Transgender people – one will be able to find research that has tried to employ SIT in its analysis.

Yet, there are reasons to question the utility of SIT as an explanation of prejudice. To be sure, the general conclusion to be drawn from SIT that prejudice involves people acting in terms of their group memberships (and not as individuals) is a fundamental insight and usefully steers researchers away from searching for individual differences explanations of prejudice. Also, the readiness of people to display ingroup bias on the basis of the most trivial category membership is an important empirical finding, although it is not, strictly, an indispensable element of SIT itself. Beyond these two valuable claims, there is little explicitly stated in the theory which permits specific predictions about when, where and how prejudice will be shown.

As noted earlier, SIT is at its most detailed when discussing the plight of lower status groups and the conditions when they may agitate for social change; it is much less specific about members of privileged or majority groups who, after all, are often the main perpetrators¹⁴ of prejudice and discrimination. To the extent that SIT did discuss possible reactions to threatened or 'insecure' identities, whether of the subordinate or the dominant group, most of its predictions were couched in terms of gaining, maintaining or restoring

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positive distinctiveness. Such responses were conventionally operationalised in terms of showing increased ingroup favouritism, most often measured as differential evaluations of or reward allocations to the ingroup and the outgroup. In the initial empirical work devoted to testing SIT hypotheses – for instance, in the two Tajfel (1978, 1982) edited volumes – studies that explicitly included measures of negative feelings towards or of outright derogation of the outgroup are notable by their absence.

It was not just at an empirical level that early social identity researchers neglected emotion; it was almost completely absent from all the formal statements of SIT. It gets a brief mention in some definitions of social identity (Tajfel, 1974a, p.69), but not all (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p.40; Tajfel & Turner, 1986, p. 16), but that is about the extent of it. The major emphasis was always on predicting differentiation and the search for positive distinctiveness and one can search in vain for hypotheses about when groups might actually dislike or hate each other, or worse. This is both an ironic and a lamentable omission. Ironic because Tajfel's life mission was to understand how human barbarity, as manifested in the Holocaust and other genocides, could come about (Brown, 2019). And lamentable because then, as now, many of the most serious manifestations of prejudice in everyday life self-evidently involve strongly felt emotions. When people deface Jewish graves with swastikas, or rip a hijab from a Muslim woman's head, or brutally assault a Gay couple for holding hands in the street, surely the perpetrators are doing something more than seeking to establish some positive distinctiveness for their ingroups? Not for nothing are such behaviours called *hate* crimes.

Others have noted this neglect of emotion in SIT. Tony Manstead remarks:

“The classic version of social identity theory said nothing about emotion, not explicitly anyway. It's implicit in the ideas of identity threat and the whole idea of the search for positive distinctiveness – presumably there are emotions associated

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*with those and how they manifest themselves in behaviour. But there's no direct treatment of emotion.....emotions are an epiphenomenon almost, a side issue"*¹⁵.

Jim Sidanius is even blunter:

*"It (SIT) is a plausible explanation for ingroup favouritism, but it is an implausible explanation for outgroup aggression, for the Holocaust, for the massacre of the Tutsis etc.....because it doesn't deal with hatred, it doesn't deal with blood. It deals with giving more coins to the ingroup than to the outgroup and then constructing stories around why you did that"*¹⁶.

And, finally, Mick Billig, a long-term admirer of Tajfel since his PhD days with him, admitted:

*"I think that, technically, it's a theory about how groups which have been discriminated can boost themselves and can campaign against discrimination....It's not a theory to explain the issue he wanted explained. To say that the Germans persecuted the Jews because they needed to improve their own sense of identity, their self-worth, is not one that should be entertained"*¹⁷.

In summary, then, as a formal theory, with clearly stated propositions and hypotheses and well specified boundary conditions, SIT is lacking in several respects. It also is insufficient as a theory of identity or of prejudice. Nevertheless, those deficiencies do not detract from its remarkable generative power in stimulating many diverging and highly productive lines of enquiry. This is where the true value of SIT's legacy lies: as an invaluable general framework which provides the foundations, but not the detailed building plan, for understanding the manifold ways in which social behaviour in intergroup settings can be transformed, once people's identities as group members become psychologically salient.

***"Let a hundred flowers bloom"*¹⁸: the social identity perspective in contemporary social psychology and elsewhere.**

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Following the helpful lead of Postmes and Branscombe (2010), I conducted a ‘cited reference’ search in Web of Science (WoS) for the two Tajfel and Turner chapters (1979, 1986) and Tajfel (1974a) (these are the most common citations for SIT). This yielded over 13,200 records¹⁹. By way of comparison, this is several hundred more citations than Festinger’s (1957) famous theory of cognitive dissonance has attracted (12,700).

WoS classifies those citations by discipline. Not surprisingly, social psychology is the best represented field (32%). But it is instructive to see the impact of SIT *outside* psychology: apparently scholars in business and management (27%), sociology (6%) and political science (6%) are all finding social identity ideas useful. There are also multiple (all >100) citations in fields as diverse as hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism, education, economics, linguistics, women’s studies and environmental studies. Indisputably, then, SIT has spread its tentacles far and wide. In the following, I discuss how it has been incorporated into the study of intergroup emotions, nationalism and patriotism, intragroup processes (cohesion, social influence and leadership), organisational behaviour, health and well-being, and social neuroscience. Although this list of topics may seem somewhat arbitrary, it is my judgement that it includes the majority of the current liveliest and most productive research off-shoots from SIT.

One of the notable omissions in SIT discussed in the previous section was its failure to discuss affective aspects of intergroup relations. Much of the credit for rectifying that omission should go to Smith and Mackie, who have put emotion squarely back onto the intergroup research agenda (Mackie & Smith, 2015, 2018; Smith, 1993). They have developed Intergroup Emotions Theory (IET) which seeks to predict which emotions will be felt by group members in particular intergroup contexts, and thence to specify which behavioural responses those emotions will give rise to. The theory begins with the fundamental insight of SIT that, in certain social situations, people’s identities as group

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members are engaged. Once this happens, again drawing directly from SIT, the ingroup's fortunes become its members' fortunes, its misfortunes their misfortunes. Then IET provides the key proposition that those group-based emotions depend on group members' appraisals of the current intergroup context in which they find themselves: if they are confronted with a powerful outgroup that looks set to threaten their existence, they will probably feel fear; if they perceive a weaker outgroup that seems to be challenging their superiority, they will feel anger; if they perceive a subordinate group which appears to endorse moral values at variance with those of the ingroup, they may well feel disgust. From such emotions, specific behaviours follow: fear usually instigates avoidance or withdrawal; anger often gives rise to the opposite – confrontation and aggression; while disgust is thought to stimulate attempts to place the outgroup at a distance or, *in extremis*, to eliminate it altogether. As the study of intergroup emotions burgeoned in the 1990s, so did the range of emotions that came under scrutiny. Two particularly interesting emotions are collective guilt and shame, sometimes experienced when group members perceive that their ingroup has behaved immorally or enjoys illegitimate privilege (e.g., Wohl, Branscombe & Klar, 2006). Again, the hypothesis is that each of these emotions has its own specific behavioural sequelae (e.g., Allpress, Brown, Giner-Sorolla, Deonna & Teoni, 2014; Gausel, Leach, Vignoles & Brown, 2012).

In sum, then, this work on intergroup emotions probably would not have happened without the initial impetus provided by SIT, but the directions it has taken over the past three decades have been quite independent of Tajfel's original theorising, simply because he was virtually silent on the emotional implications of his theory (at least in print).

The same may be said of several other interesting lines of work relating to national identification, in both its positive and negative aspects. I refer here to research which has sought to distinguish patriotism (a positive attachment to one's own country) from nationalism (positive evaluation of one's own country coupled with a derogation of other

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countries) (Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989; Mummendey, Klink, & Brown, 2001; Roccas, Klar, & Liviatan, 2006). These accounts all owe a debt to SIT in that they recognise the core insight of SIT that group identification is intimately bound up with intergroup differentiation. Where they go beyond SIT is in their various hypotheses about when explicit derogation of or aggression towards foreigners may occur. SIT proposed only a “search for positive distinctiveness”, without specifying whether that distinctiveness would be achieved by evaluating (or treating) both the ingroup and the outgroup favourably but the former more so than the latter, or the ingroup positively and the outgroup neutrally, or the ingroup positively and the outgroup negatively. In fact, it is the first two of these variants of intergroup differentiation that is most usually observed (Brewer, 1979); when explicitly negative treatment of the outgroup is the only means available for achieving positivity, differentiation is not so readily found (Mummendey & Otten, 1998). These distinctions are important because, as Brewer famously remarked, “*ingroup love is not a necessary precursor of outgroup hate*” (Brewer, 1999, p.442).

There is a certain irony in SIT’s neglect of these varieties of national identification and their differing social implications because Tajfel was well aware of them and, in fact, had written presciently about them early in his career (Tajfel, 1960). Perhaps if his premature death had not intervened, he might well have returned to them with a more sustained theoretical analysis. Indeed, in his last publication there are hints that he was thinking along those lines (Tajfel, 1984).

A third set of developments under the social identity umbrella sought to remedy another obvious gap in SIT, namely its neglect of *intragroup* processes that might contribute to identity construction, maintenance and expression. In its original formulation, once an intergroup context had rendered a particular identity salient, various identity serving processes were thought to come into play. But scarcely a line of any of the original formulations of SIT

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was devoted to the social dynamics among ingroup members that might accelerate or impede those processes.

Fortunately, several lines of research from the early 1990s onwards have largely rectified this situation (Brown & Pehrson, 2019). Most of these emanated from Turner's Self Categorisation Theory, which grew out of but considerably extended SIT to offer a general theory of group processes. Hogg (1992) initiated a programme of work to understand group cohesion from a social identity perspective. Traditionally, cohesion had been understood as the sum total of interpersonal attractions among group members (e.g., Lott & Lott, 1965). Hogg showed that very often group cohesion results not from liking one's fellow group members as individuals but from liking the *idea of the group*, as represented by its most prototypical members.

Members of real groups also interact with and influence one another. Such intragroup interaction obviously serves many purposes but sometimes it may be directed at clarifying the ingroup's perception of itself and potential behaviours towards outgroups (Postmes, Haslam & Swaab, 2005). In other words, it is by talking to our fellow group members about matters of concern to us – our country's immigration policy, or our political party's manifesto, or our football club's playing style – that we construct images (stereotypes) of our group and others and plan how to give expression to those identities in behaviour.

Our behaviour, whether towards other ingroup members or outgroupers, is usually constrained by norms (Sherif, 1936; Tankard & Paluck, 2016), and these too are bound up with our social identities. How we *should* behave is part and parcel of what we believe is prototypical for that group. Where there are group norms there are always mechanisms in place to keep deviants in line, as Festinger (1950) proposed many years ago. Yet, from a social identity perspective, not all norm deviation is equivalent. Departures from group norms which help sharpen the differences between ingroup and outgroup, and hence contribute to a

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more distinctive group identity, will be tolerated more readily than those which threaten to blur intergroup boundaries (Abrams, Marques, Bown & Henson, 2000).

Of course, not all group members are equal. Everyday observation, as well as much scientific research, confirms that most groups possess a leadership structure which results in some in the group being able to exert more influence over the group's activities than others. The study of how leaders emerge and when they are more (or less) effective has long been of interest to social psychologists (Brown & Pehrson, 2019, ch. 4). Yet, most theories of leadership treat it as a purely intragroup affair or even, in some cases, as a matter of individual disposition. In recent years, however, there has been a growing recognition that successful leaders are also those who are perceived by their followers as embodying the prototypical attributes of the ingroup (Hogg, 2001). Not only that, but they often play an active role in shaping group members' social identities, in helping to construct what it means to belong to their group (and not to some other). In Haslam, Reicher and Platow's memorable phrase (borrowed from Besson (1991)), they are frequently "*entrepreneurs of identity*" (Haslam, Reicher & Platow, 2011).

SIT's influence has also extended in what may seem to some to be quite surprising directions, outside mainstream social psychology. One of these is in the area of business and management which accounts for over a quarter of the citations of SIT, by far the best represented field outside social psychology. This in itself is quite surprising. Although it is true that four of the early papers testing SIT were conducted in occupational settings (Bourhis & Hill, 1982; Brown, 1978; Skevington, 1980, 1981), it is fair to say that intergroup relations in organisational contexts were never at the forefront of Tajfel's concerns. For him, interethnic prejudice and conflict and large-scale societal change were always the phenomena of interest.

The application of social identity ideas to organisational settings was given a significant boost by Ashforth and Mael (1989). They took one of the central ideas in SIT – that groups can become incorporated into people’s social identities with a consequent need for positive intergroup differentiation – and sketched out its implications for organisational and sub-organisational loyalty and commitment, institutional socialisation, and intra-organisational conflict. One of the issues dwelt on by these authors was the need for reliable and valid measures of organisational identification. Subsequent researchers resonated to that call and a sizeable number of the citations of SIT in the business and management fields are concerned with just that. Other popular topics are: workgroup diversity and group performance, customer/client brand identification, work-family balance, mergers and acquisitions and, of course, leadership (Haslam, 2001).

A fifth development in social identity research has been to explore the implications of group memberships and their associated identities for health and well-being (Haslam, Jetten, Cruwys, Dingle & Haslam, 2018; Jetten, Haslam & Haslam, 2012). The message of this research can be summarised in a simple five-word phrase, ‘*groups are good for you*’. They can be good for you in providing additional resilience to deal with the challenges presented by disasters (Drury, Brown, Gonzalez & Miranda, 2016). They can be beneficial for well-being when imbued with symbolic significance, as studies of participants in mass religious gatherings have shown (Alnabulsi & Drury, 2014; Tewari, Khan, Hopkins, Srinivasan & Reicher, 2012). They can promote better cognitive functioning and mental health, as research with the elderly, stroke patients and people suffering from depression has found (Cruwys, Dingle, Haslam, Haslam, Jetten & Morton, 2013; Haslam, Cruwys & Haslam, 2014; Haslam, Holme, Haslam, Iyer, Jetten & Williams, 2008). Even in surveys of ‘normal’ populations, those with many group memberships have higher well-being than those with few, even controlling for the number of interpersonal relationships (Helliwell & Barrington-Levy, 2012;

Jetten, Branscombe, et al., 2015). In short, group memberships and the social identities they confer can provide an effective '*Social Cure*' for many ailments (Jetten et al., 2012).

Quite why group memberships can have curative properties is not yet well understood, although it seems likely that they provide people with a sense of belonging, feelings of efficacy and social support (Greenaway, Cruwys, Haslam & Jetten, 2015; Kyprianides, Easterbrook & Brown, 2019). What is interesting, though, is that, notwithstanding the intellectual debt that social cure research owes to SIT, the only aspect in SIT itself that predicted well-being benefits of groups was its core hypothesis that the 'search for distinctiveness' was motivated by a need for positive self-esteem among group members; presumably, if distinctiveness was achieved, people's well-being would increase. However, it is worth noting that this prediction in SIT was restricted to the potential well-being benefits accruing from *intergroup* comparisons. Yet, the intriguing and consistent finding from social cure research is that group memberships and identifications *in and of themselves* confer health benefits, whether or not there are other groups actually or psychologically present. Once again, it is another brilliant example of how one idea in SIT - that group memberships can become incorporated into the self-concept - has given rise to the flowering of a whole new research literature.

A final offshoot of SIT - and perhaps the most surprising development of all - has been in neuroscience. Since the turn of this century, neuroscientists started to take a concerted interest in the neural substrates of prejudice and intergroup relations, using the full paraphernalia of techniques at their disposal (e.g., fMRI; Amodio, 2008). Some of this work has been directly inspired by SIT (e.g., Cikara & van Bavel, 2014; van Bavel & Cunningham, 2010). The general objective of this research has been to examine how mere social categorisation (being classified as a member of group) or social identification (making a meaningful social category temporarily salient) can have neural consequences which are then

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linked to intergroup attitudes, judgements or behaviour. This approach is best exemplified by Xiao, Coppin and van Bavel's (2016) "*perceptual model of intergroup relations*". In it, they propose that self-categorisation, collective identification and features of the intergroup context can all have perceptual effects, whether in the visual, auditory or olfactory domain, and that these perceptions mediate the relationship between social identification and intergroup relations.

In many ways, this approach is a neuroscientific reprise of Bruner's *New Look* perspective that was so influential for Tajfel early in his career (e.g., Bruner, 1957; Tajfel, 1957). Indeed, Xiao and her colleagues acknowledge this debt to Bruner explicitly:

"Rather than perceiving the world as it is, people's motives, experiences and expectations can modify how they experience external stimuli.....To the extent that perceptual imprints are afforded social value by way of group affiliations and identities, people should perceive these stimuli differently. These biased representations of the world are more than mere perceptual errors; rather they are evolved adapted biases that are beneficial to survival" (p. 258).

It is noteworthy that Tajfel himself, in his own contribution to the *New Look* literature, concluded an article on the accentuation effects of value on physical judgements with a modest speculation about their potential applicability to the intergroup domain (Tajfel, 1957, p. 202-203). In that sense, he might have permitted himself a wry smile at 21st Century neuroscientists revisiting some of the phenomena he studied all those years ago. But might that smile not as quickly have given way to a frown of disapproval over this new attempt to reduce social psychological phenomena to neural processes, an argument he railed against so vociferously in that same year (Peters & Tajfel, 1957)? van Bavel thinks not. In answer to the charge of reductionism, he comments:

"I follow the logic of consilience laid out by E.O. Wilson, which is that

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a theory that operates successfully at multiple levels of analysis is more likely to be true and stand the test of time. On those grounds, I think there is a lot to be gained by not only looking at social psychological aspects of identity, but seeing how these unfold at higher levels of analysis (social systems) and lower levels of analysis (the brain and cognition)....Moving up and down levels of analysis can generate new predictions and insights that might be hard to see if we always stick at the same level of analysis”²⁰.

In the late 1970s, Tajfel was interviewed by the journalist David Cohen. Cohen asked him to predict how well his approach might fare in the future. Tajfel replied:

“I think it’s winning ground. I don’t know where it’s going to go. If, twenty years from now, someone is interested enough to write that Tajfel was writing nonsense, that’s fine. I think it’s necessary to stir these issues up because I think they are important” (Cohen, 1977, p. 306).

How right he was proved! But I suspect that not even Tajfel could have foreseen the multifarious flowering of his ideas that has happened since his death (in 1982). This surely is a worthy legacy of this extraordinary social scientist.

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Footnotes

¹ This is an amended and abridged version of chapter 8 of my biography of Tajfel (Brown, 2019). I acknowledge the support of The Leverhulme Trust which funded this research through a Major Research Fellowship to the author (MRF-2015-009). I am also grateful to the editors and an anonymous reviewer for their especially insightful comments on an earlier version of the paper.

² In the sense I am using it here, the phrase ‘social identity approach’ is a little narrower in scope than how it is used by Reicher, Spears and Haslam (2010). Those authors used the phrase to denote a combination of SIT and Self Categorisation Theory (SCT). I have chosen to focus my discussion mainly on SIT and its subsequent developments for two reasons. First, it is the more commonly cited reference in much contemporary social identity research; and second, because SCT should properly be considered as a theory in its own right and not conflated with SIT as, indeed, Turner was prone to point out (Turner & Reynolds, 2010).

³ In this paper I discuss only Tajfel’s *intellectual* legacy. Recent revelations about some unsavoury aspects of his behaviour towards women (Brown, 2019; Young & Hegarty, 2019) have led to some public discussion about whether his intellectual contribution to social psychology should be re-appraised in the light of that behaviour. I am of the opinion that this is not necessary. I believe it is possible to assess his scientific legacy independently of - and without condoning - his conduct in other spheres.

⁴ In fairness, it must be admitted that many other social psychological theories share this imprecision. Nevertheless, as examples of more precisely formulated theories one could cite Festinger’s (1954) Social Comparison Theory or Turner et al.’s (1987) SCT.

⁵ In SIT, social mobility (leaving the group) can take the literal form of abandoning it and attempting to join another, or it can take the form of a psychological distancing (or disidentification), often by adopting physical or behavioural characteristics which might

allow one to ‘pass’ as a member of another group and hide one’s membership of a stigmatised group.

⁶ Personal communication, May 2018.

⁷ Personal communication, December 2018.

⁸ Hogg interview, August 2018.

⁹ Abrams interview, November 2018.

¹⁰ I am grateful to John Drury for pointing this out.

¹¹ I could find only two brief comments in the whole Tajfel corpus that recognised the possibility that variations in strength of identification could be important. Both were made whilst discussing the relationship between Sherif’s (1966) Realistic Conflict Theory and SIT: “*The outcome of the interaction between the merging of group goals and the preservation of group identity must obviously depend upon the relative importance of the group goals to be attained and the relative strength of ingroup identification*” (Tajfel, 1974a, p. 82); “*Sherif’s interactions in terms of “group identifications” are the more likely the stronger are the evaluative and emotional components of one’s notion of the ingroup and of one’s membership in it*” (Tajfel, 1978a, p. 29). However, both remarks were made *en passant* and their implications were never properly developed.

¹² Ng interview, August 2017.

¹³ Reicher interview, June 2018.

¹⁴ But, of course, not the only ones. Members of minority groups may also display prejudice towards one another or, indeed, towards majority groups. But the fact remains that the animosities that tend to be the most pervasive and to have the most negative consequences for social cohesion are those shown by more powerful (majority) groups towards subordinate or stigmatised groups.

¹⁵ Manstead interview, March 2018.

¹⁶ Sidanius interview, May 2018.

¹⁷ Billig interview, October 2016.

¹⁸ Attributed to Mao Zedong, leader of the Chinese Communist Party (1957).

¹⁹ December 2018.

²⁰ Personal communication, 27 May 2018.